

PRETORIA CENTRAL GAOL, 1960

HANNAH STANTON

ON March 30th, 1960, and on successive days, men and women, Europeans and non-Europeans, were arrested and detained throughout the Union of South Africa.

I was arrested on March 30th at 3.15 a.m. There was a battering on my door at Tumelong Mission, Lady Selborne; I opened it to find standing outside three men and a wardress from the Special Branch, who told me that I would have to go with them quietly or they would take me by force. On my asking for their warrant to do this, I was told that a State of Emergency had been declared and that a warrant was not necessary. In point of fact, the Emergency was not declared until the following afternoon. I was taken to Pretoria Gaol where I spent the next seven-and-a-half weeks. No charge was ever brought against me; I never knew why I had been detained. I could only conclude that, as I had exposed police brutality whenever it had occurred during the past three years in Lady Selborne township, the police were now retaliating.

As a result of pressure by the United Kingdom Government, I was allowed to consult my lawyer about my detention and a petition was brought on my behalf in the Supreme Court. This was dismissed. Neither I nor my legal advisers had expected any other outcome. But it was of value that the case should have been aired in the courts. I was the only detainee among the 1,900 to be allowed to consult a lawyer about my detention. Eventually, on May 19th, I was deported without any opportunity of appeal.

In Pretoria Gaol the European detainees, both men and women, were kept in solitary confinement for three weeks—though this had certainly not occurred in the Johannesburg Gaol, the Fort, where detainees had been in groups since the date of their arrest. The non-European detainees in Pretoria were treated rather differently; the women were at first in separate cells, though near each other, while the men were put together, five in a cell.

Prison conditions were graded: Europeans had Class I treatment; Coloureds and Asiatics had Class II; and Africans, Class III. Pretoria Gaol, I gathered, had a good name for the tolerable treatment of all racial groups; certainly from what I was told of the Fort, the food there, even for the Europeans, appears to have been uneatable.

Class I treatment in Pretoria Gaol included a breakfast at seven o'clock, when mealie porridge, brown bread and coffee were provided; lunch arrived at 11.30 and consisted of stewed meat, quite appetisingly cooked, and two vegetables; the evening and last meal arrived at 3.30 p.m. (earlier on public holidays) and consisted of soup, brown bread, coffee and small containers of fat, sugar and marmalade to be kept over until the next day. The European women detainees had a bath a day; ten minutes exercise after the first week, and then progressively more and more. We had a bedstead, mattress, blankets and sheets, a locker, and a table and chair in our cells. We also had a sanitary bucket with a lid which was emptied by the African convicts once a day. Our lights were put out at eight o'clock and put on again at seven in the morning; during these hours, the only light available was what filtered in from the street lamp outside.

Class III treatment provided primitive prison conditions for even the most cultured of the African detainees. The food consisted of mealie meal porridge, a little sugar, mealies, beans, a very small portion of meat three times a week on the mealie pap, and no bread: this followed a simple rural African diet to which the prison authorities still think every African is accustomed. Grade III provided no furniture in the cells; a thin mat and blankets were issued for bedding; there was water in a pail and a smelly tin without a lid for sanitary purposes. No facilities were given for baths and very little for exercise.

Class II treatment for Coloureds and Asiatics consisted of a slightly better diet than Class III, a slightly thicker mat and a sanitary pail with a lid. One day I looked with interest at the buckets outside a cell shared by a Coloured woman and an African woman; one bucket had a lid and one had not.

During the first few days friends were allowed to send in sweets, orange juice, marmite, tinned food, and some books. This was soon stopped; but, in due course, after weeks of waiting in my case, we were able to have money in our prison accounts and to order extra food from the prison canteen. This was available to both Europeans and non-Europeans.

Physical conditions were bearable; to my intense relief my cell had a window, heavily barred, which overlooked the prison recreation grounds and in the distance the Magaliesburg Mountains. I stood on my locker and gazed at them for hours. I was horrified later to realize the very confined space in Mrs. Joseph's cell, considerably smaller than my own (mine was 8 ft. by 10 ft.).

Over the walls of her cell and stretching *under* her window was heavy wire netting, so that there was no chance of her having the refreshment of looking out of her window. At the end of three weeks we were put together, and it was an unutterable relief to have her company; she joined me in my cell and was able to enjoy my window. We listened during the long evenings to the African convicts singing, and shuddered at the brutal way the wardresses would shout at the African convicts. At times a convict was punished, and we heard the groans.

In prison I had the support of the prayers of friends and the framework of church services throughout the day to follow. For me it was a spiritual experience which I shall not forget, as I shall not forget the personal experience of helplessness and frustration which all of us shared, the men and women detainees of all races.

During the first five weeks in gaol, I experienced to the full the frustration and anxiety over the disruption of a life's work, in my case as Warden of an Anglican Mission. This was work to which I knew God had called me. I grieved for my work, for my staff exhausted and anxious, for my relatives and friends, for my missionary students at the Mission and for the welfare of all those dependent upon me. But it was when Mrs. Joseph and I were joined by a group of 20 women from Johannesburg, most of whom were wives and mothers, that I realized the more acute agony of the mother cut off from her family. Seven of the women had husbands who were also detained; they thought of their children looked after by friends or relatives, missing immeasurably the care of parents.

In several cases parents had not been able to make adequate arrangements for the care of children. One mother had had to leave her young son alone in the flat on her arrest. Another mother had on her mind the condition of her only son who had acute diabetes: was he keeping to the rigid diet prescribed for him? Was he able to give himself his insulin satisfactorily? Was he over-doing himself rushing to school for early classes?

A wife, whose husband was also arrested, heard that her husband's job had been terminated at a week's notice. She and her husband had lately managed after years of saving to move into their own house, on which they had paid the first instalments. The hopes of years had to be abandoned. A mother of four children under the age of ten, heard that her husband, also detained, had been taken ill one night in gaol. His ulcer had

perforated, he had bled all night and his companions had been unable to attract anyone's attention. In the morning he was in a state of collapse.

Another mother, whose son had been involved in a motor accident shortly before and who in consequence had become stone deaf, knew that without her and her means of contact with him his whole rehabilitation would be endangered.

These are problems which mothers and wives face whenever illness or disaster means sudden unforeseen separation from their families. But here in prison, detained under the Emergency regulations, week after week, month after month, without charges preferred against them, without access to their legal advisers and with such problems ever on their minds, anxiety, frustration and bitterness reached an aching agony.

I can only describe from personal contact and experience the feelings of a very few of the 1,900, and these all European women. The non-European detainees could not have felt any less frustrated and anxious, and had in any case far worse material conditions to put up with; in many cases there must have been more agony. The majority of them undoubtedly had lost their jobs; their families were literally starving and we heard of detainees' families who were being turned out of their homes in the Johannesburg locations.

When, in the sixth week of my detention, the group of 20 women were moved from Johannesburg to Pretoria, they arrived already committed to a hunger strike in protest against the continued detention without charges of all the detainees. When there was no response to their appeal to the Minister of Justice they started on their fast on May 13th, and continued this for eight days, when they abandoned it on medical grounds. During this time they took no food at all: I was with them all the time and can vouch for this. All lost considerable weight, one woman lost 16 lbs. They drank about eight cups of water a day, and towards the end of the fast some of them, feeling very weak, took a few teaspoonfuls of glucose. It was during this time that they heard from their visitors that their children had been demonstrating on the steps of the Johannesburg Town Hall and had been arrested.

Many of the detainees have now been released: 250, we are told, still remain. But it must not be forgotten that these men and women, 1,900 of them, were detained and that no charges were ever preferred against them. Lives have been endangered and interrupted, work has been irreparably damaged, acute misery has been caused; and to what end . . . ?